

THE GREAT HERONRY OF GARSEN ON THE RIVER TANA

By MYLES E. W. NORTH

Near Garsen—the place where the Malindi-Lamu road crosses the River Tana—there is a great open plain east of the river which is flooded annually for several months during the long rains from early May onwards, and somewhat higher country on the west of the river which is flooded only in parts. About a couple of miles below Garsen on this west bank there is a lagoon called Isowe, or Kubi Balle, which gets filled at the height of each May flood and is then sealed off, so the water dries slowly and lasts for several months—well into September, I think. The lagoon is elongated, with open water at the lower end near the river, but the upper portion is filled by a thicket of henna trees (*Lawsonia inermis*) which grow in the water.

This thicket is used during the months of flood (May to September) as a breeding colony by numerous water birds. As such it must be one of the finest in the country, fully comparable to the great colony at Kisumu described by Jackson in his *Birds of Kenya and Uganda*, and destroyed many years ago in the course of anti-malarial operations. The birds breeding at Isowe make use of the wonderful feeding grounds of the flooded areas east of the river.

On the 20th-21st August 1956 I visited the colony with General Sir Gerald Lathbury and his A.D.C., Captain Simmons, and with Commander R. M. Jenkins, the D.C. Tana River. We found 13 species breeding here: Darter, Grey Heron, Purple Heron, Great White Egret, Yellow-billed Egret, Black Heron, Little Egret, Squacco Heron, Night Heron, Open-Bill Stork, Sacred Ibis, Glossy Ibis and African Spoonbill. A fourteenth—the Buff-backed Heron—was suspected but not proved.

The local people told us that this site is used every long rains. Long ago Major T. H. E. Jackson notified me of the existence of this colony, which he had visited in July 1940 and had then found a number of species breeding which sounded very similar to what we found in 1956.

From the visitor's point of view the virtue of this swamp is that it can be visited during the long rains at any time when the Malindi-Garsen road happens to be open, and in fact it is only a mile from the road at a point some five miles short of Garsen (Wanjila Hill and camp site). The point to strike off from the road is at a telegraph pole numbered 1312; here follow a well-marked cattle track which is quite suitable for a Land Rover provided that the ground is reasonably dry. The track leads to the upper end of the lagoon, from either side of which one can obtain excellent views of the birds. May and June would, I think, be particularly suitable months for a visit. The time of our visit—August—was rather late, especially for the smaller species, many of which had finished nesting by then. More observations are badly needed. It is, however, important that any observations should be done with discretion and with the minimum interference to the birds.

List of breeding birds

These were as seen on the 20th-21st August 1956. In each case I have made a guess of the number of breeding pairs present, based on my impression of the number of occupied nests or fledged young to be seen there—but it should be emphasised that these are merely impressions and are not based on any form of count, for which there was no time. No mention is made of non-breeding birds here, since these, too, would have needed more time.

- DARTER. *Anhinga rufa*. 50 pairs? Several birds seen incubating in a dead tree.
- GREY HERON. *Ardea cinerea*. Under 30 pairs? Two nearly-fledged young seen.
- PURPLE HERON. *Pyrroherodia purpurea*. 100 pairs? Many fledged young clambering about.
- GREAT WHITE EGRET. *Casmerodius albus*. Several hundred pairs? Young mostly fledged, but some still in down.
- YELLOW-BILLED EGRET. *Mesophoyx intermedius*. Several hundred pairs? Young of various stages.
- BLACK HERON. *Melanophoyx ardesiaca*. 50 pairs? Large fledged young wandering about.
- LITTLE EGRET. *Egretta garzetta*. 200 pairs? Young seen.
- BUFF-BACKED HERON. *Bubulcus ibis*. A bird in full breeding plumage seen, but no proof of actual breeding.
- SQUACCO HERON. *Ardeola ralloides*. 100 pairs? Many streaky juveniles wandering about.
- NIGHT HERON. *Nycticorax nycticorax*. A few hundred pairs? Many spotty juveniles walking or flying about.
- OPEN-BILL STORK. *Anastomus lamelligerus*. A few hundred pairs? Nests were scattered over a considerable area and mainly had young.
- SACRED IBIS. *Threskiornis aethiopicus*. 50 pairs? Nests had downy young, for the most part.
- GLOSSY IBIS. *Plegadis falcinellus*. Five pairs? One nest certainly occupied; perhaps two.
- AFRICAN SPOONBILL. *Platalea alba*. 50 pairs? Young at various stages.
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NOTES ON THE EAST AFRICAN PORCUPINE

(*Hystrix galeata*)

By C. A. SPINAGE, F.Z.S.

The Common Porcupine is generally referred to as adapting an old ant-bear hole or something similar for its home. In the writer's experience, however, they are extremely careful and painstaking home-builders, the sites often being carefully chosen on a well-drained slope. My observations have all been confined to burrows in exotic eucalyptus woodland which they seem to favour. The holes are often excavated very deeply, as can be seen from the amount of earth thrown up which may run into several hundredweights in some cases.

A simple burrow seems to consist merely of two entrances, but in places where the animal is considerably persecuted by Africans periodically attempting to suffocate it by smoking, the burrow may be extremely complex, having as many as five separate entrance holes. The one depicted in Fig. A also had a hole that was quite well concealed in the undergrowth (inset) and without any tracks going near to it. This may have been an air hole or perhaps the ground had merely caved in when the tunnel was being excavated.